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ABSTRACT

This document presents 17 philosophical statements regarding school-age care programs, staff, and challenges. The essence of school-age care is to understand childhood and to facilitate positive development. Because these programs provide a place where children have significant contact with adults within a multi-age peer group, they can teach peaceful living skills and facilitate positive youth development. Careful research must identify factors in quality school-age care programs. Although the field of school-age care has had a good history so far, it is now at a crossroads. To increase professionalism, college training, accreditation of sites, and licensing of providers are needed. Staff need competencies in social interaction and development; family dynamics; cultural, ethnic, and gender sensitivity; understanding play, child leadership; and handling special needs children. Staff must be in a partnership with the children in which children plan events and adults guide the process. Staff can be trained on a variety of levels; it is important to maintain the current diversity of backgrounds while identifying educational requirements. Staff need to consider the socialization opportunities within discrete interactions. The facilitation of positive development in children should guide program development and adult-child interactions. Challenges to school-age care programs include identifying the role and purpose of the field, developing a base of research, theory, and knowledge, stemming the high staff turnover rate, and beginning the education cycle. Finally, school-age care providers should be held to the principle of "in loco parentis," meaning "in place of the parents." (KDFB)

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Axioms and Assumptions:

A Short Philosophy Regarding the Professionalization of School-Age Care

by Jim and Laurie Ollhoff

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School-Age Care Programs

1. The Essence of School-Age Care is to Understand Childhood Time

Spontaneity. Laughter. Playful. Discovering new things. Watching clouds. Wonder and awe. Trust. Hugs. These are the gifts of childhood.

It seems such a far cry than the reality we see daily: gangs, drugs, murder, neglect, abuse, high sophistication, violence, immaturity. SAC has the potential to give childhood back.

But first we must take what we do seriously. We are not babysitters. We are not simply to keep the children safe until their parents come. We are participators in the development of the children of our society. The role of the school-age care provider is to be a facilitator of positive development in children.

Children need the adults who make up our staffs. Adult participation gives validity to the child's activity; adults can use the opportunity to teach appropriate skills.

2. School-Age Care can be a Place to Learn Peaceful Living Skills

Not too many years ago, children spent three to four hours a day in one-on-one significant contact with adults. In that time, children learned a trade, learned skills, learned how to live together, and learned they were valuable, capable, and had a social role.

In today's society, studies suggest that children's contact with adults is transient and superficial. In many cases, children only spend a few minutes a day in significant contact. The learning of social skills is no longer a natural part of socialization. Now, social skills must be taught, intentionally and purposefully.

The only place where children are in a multi-age peer group (the critical place for teaching social skills) is in school-age child care. Only in SAC is there a group that has to live together and get along. SAC is the premier place to teach peaceful living skills.

3. School-Age Care can Facilitate Positive Youth Development

Adolescents do not suddenly decide to carry a gun to school one day. Youth who do (20% carry a weapon in any given month) have been on a developmental pathway to violence since early childhood, perhaps since infancy. It is extremely difficult to reform delinquent youth. It is relatively easy to move school-age children off that pathway to violence and begin to nurture positive development.

Through play and relationships, through significant adult contact and the multi-age structure of a quality program, children can be nurtured for positive development. The rising tide of at-risk behavior can be halted, if we take our opportunity in SAC seriously.

4. Careful Research Must Identify Factors in Quality School-Age Care Programs

Frighteningly little research has been done on SAC programs. We know enough to take some theory from other disciplines and to make some educated guesses about our programming. But we are still handicapped by a lack of research.

We need to find ways to help programs support and implement what we believe is quality programming. We need distribution and evaluation vehicles to help programs develop. We need to critically think about the proclamations we make about quality.

5. The Field of School-Age Care has had a Good History So Far

We have had myriads of caring adults who, despite squashingly low pay and unwieldy hours, persevered to care for the children. We have had guides who pulled together to provide resources and leadership to the profession. We have had positive conferences and colleges who pioneer SAC classes.

There is a continued growing need for school-age care in our society. And there is a growing awareness of the problems of social isolation and home aloneness. There is also a positive trend in understanding that parenting skills do not come by osmosis, but that parenting skills can be taught and learned. As that understanding broadens, there will be a trend to find SAC providers who are trained and professional.

6. School-Age Care is at a Crossroads

The field of SAC needs to intentionally decide on its future. If its desire is to professionalize, it needs to understand the benefits as well as the costs. If it declines the opportunity to professionalize, there are costs associated with that route as well.

In order to professionalize, college courses need to become available and standardized. We need to agree on our required competencies and codes of ethics. We need to move to accredit sites and license the professionals. We need to be ready to decline licenses to people who would not be good for children.

If the field resists these changes, that will also be a decision about our future. The implications of that decision is to continue to receive low pay and low status. It means perpetuating the myth that anyone can do child care. While this route is less work, the long-term implications for children are questionable.

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7. School-Age Care Staff Need Competencies in Social Interaction and Development

One of the main competencies of the SAC provider is to understand the dynamics of social interaction. An effective staff member will know how to facilitate self-esteem; will know how to enhance responsibility; will know how to generate educative discipline; will know how to resolve conflict; will know how to communicate in a straight, honest, and well-differentiated manner, without messages of shame or defensiveness.

SAC providers can become experts in the process of peaceful living skills, specialists in the facilitation of social skills. The theory and the skills of this psychologic can be taught in a classroom, but the practice is best learned in a mentor-apprentice relationship.

8. School-Age Care Staff Need Other Competencies as Well

SAC providers need other competencies too, in order to reach full effectiveness. Other competencies include: understanding something of family dynamics; cultural, ethnic, and gender sensitivity; practices of effective programming; child leadership; understanding play and choices; handling special children (gifted, handicapped, ADHD, foreign, etc.).

9. School-Age Care Staff Must be in a Partnership with the Children

Some SAC sites are adult-controlled. The staff plan everything, implement everything, do everything. The children are recipients of the control and the actions of the adults.

Some SAC sites are just the opposite. "Free choice" is the motto, and children are expected to plan everything. Adults are not permitted to plan or implement anything, they are there for supervision only.

In the adult-controlled site, children will rebel against the heavy dictatorial hand. Adults will burnout from controlling everything. In the free-choice site, children are chaotic and adults feel impotent and useless.

A program in the middle of those two extremes is ideal. Children plan events, but adults can shepherd and guide the process. Children can lead events with the support of the staff. Staff can participate with the children without controlling them, and staff can teach children how to make good choices and give them parameters and boundaries. Adults must be partners and guides through the critical and often neglected process of positive child development.

10. School-Age Care Staff can be Trained on a Variety of Levels

There is an advantage in the way people are currently trained for school-age care. Staff bring a diversity to the programs--they come from orientations of education, recreation, child development, clinical psychology, and community development. While there eventually needs to be a standardized BA program for SAC providers, we need to look at how to keep the wonderful diversity.

If the profession could reach a consensus on nomenclature, we might look at how each of the staff positions are trained. What kind of degree does a site coordinator need? Program director? Aides? Who needs a BA in SAC? Who needs a *certificate of proficiency*? Who needs a beginner's certificate? Who needs a master's degree? These are questions we will have to answer in the near future.

11. School-Age Care Staff Need a Big Picture Approach

One of the principles of an effective SAC provider is to take the big picture into every social interaction. For example, when a child is misbehaving, the SAC provider would not think, "How do I stop this behavior?" but rather, "How do I stop this behavior in such a way that it will be educative for the life of the child?" When two children are fighting, rather than think, "How can I stop the fight?" we can use the opportunity to teach conflict resolution skills. Our question then, should be, "How can I provide them with the skills they need so that next time they fight they will be less reliant on adult intervention and more skilled in resolving the situation themselves?"

If we believe that SAC providers are important socialization entities for children, and if we believe that SAC programs are the premier place to teach peaceful living skills, then we must bring the big picture into each social interaction. We must always be thinking of the long-term development of the child.

12. School-Age Care Staff Facilitate Positive Development in Children

If we see this as our role in school-age care, then everything we do must be filtered through this mission. This mission statement will tell us what kind of activities to offer and what kind of choices to offer. The idea is that everything we do—in programming or our interactions—our goal is to facilitate positive development in children.

School-Age Care Challenges

13. Identifying Role and Purpose

Large numbers of field people need to be discussion role and purpose. If it is going to be a guiding principle for us, then it needs to be a major course of discussion.

What is our role? What is our purpose? Is the purpose of SAC to keep kids happy? Is that a good enough outcome by itself? Is that an outcome we want? Is the purpose of SAC to keep children stimulated? Judging by operations, it would seem some sites believe so. Understanding the role of adults in SAC is critical if want to professionalize.

14. Developing a Base of Research, Theory, and Knowledge

Researchers need to start doing studies on school-age care programs. We need theoretians to dialog with the researchers, so they know how to construct the research. Practioners need to telling the theoretians what works and what doesn't.

We don't need more books of games, activities, and techniques to use. We need a growing body of knowledge that is specifically and uniquely SAC. We need a dialog between research and theory so that our studies can prove (or disprove) what we believe. We need our own philosophy in school-age care, our own theory of what we should do and why. We need an understanding of social dynamics and interaction. When someone asks, "Why are you doing that?" we can reply why we are doing it, the advantage it has for children, and the social science theory behind it.

15. Stemming the High Staff Turnover Rate

Common sense, as well as early research tells us that children are better off with a long-term provider, rather than a high number of short-term ones. High turnover among staff is also an administrative problem, as new people must be trained in, learn the ropes, and develop relationships with the children.

High staff turnover is certainly tied to low pay, but it is also tied to the status of child care as a paraprofession and role ambiguity.

Stemming the tide has to do with developing quality programs, engaging in continuing education, and securing higher wages for workers.

16. Beginning the Education Cycle

Three concurrent challenges hinder starting college education programs for SAC. *First*, we have to convince colleges to offer SAC programs. In a time of tight budgets, colleges are often resistant to starting new programs. Start-up money is required, and colleges may want to wait to see a proven market.

Second, SAC workers need to be convinced to go back and get MAs and doctorates. Accreditation agencies want college courses to be taught by people with MAs and doctorates. Professors who have been school-age care staff are the best choice for teaching SAC personnel. It may be difficult to convince SAC providers to pioneer graduate degrees when colleges are questioning the program.

Third, and most important, field practioners need to understand that education can benefit their practice. They must fight the notion that "anyone can do child care," and believe that there is specific and unique knowledge and skills needed for SAC. Yet even *with* that understanding, will practioners pay out large amounts of money for training when there is no lane change or salary incentive?

Conclusions

17. "In Place of the Parent"

In the one room schoolhouses of yesteryear, the teachers were held to a principle known as *in loco parentis*, meaning "in place of the parent." It meant that the community took seriously the office of teacher. They believed that parents were giving up part of the parenting task to the teacher. Teachers were held to tight ethical and moral standards, because the community did not want children to learn what was outside the values of that community. Teachers cared for children in place of the parent, as a substitute socialization entity. The community believed, as do most cultures of the world, that it took a whole community to raise a child.

School-age care is also *in loco parentis*. SAC providers are part of the children's socialization. The different aspects of the community hold hands to uplift the children. Positive development for children is only possible when we see ourselves in this light.

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